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## Multiple Services and Your Church's Future

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## **Multiple Services and Your Church's Future**

**Donald E. Ross**

I watched the deacon closely. He had a look of pain in his eyes as he considered the question I had just put to him. Our small church, which was my first pastorate, had more than doubled in sized, and I was seriously considering two morning worship services. I had just asked him for his opinion.

"Pastor, if we do that, we'll split the church. I can't believe we would even consider such a thing." The muscles in his face grew taut as he declared, "Maybe it's the right thing to do, but I just can't see it."

This trusted deacon, a definite influencer in our church, thought the idea of offering two morning worship services would be very damaging. Clearly he was not in favor of it and I calculated in my mind whether I would be able to convince him, or at least withstand the tide of resistance that might come as a result. We eventually did add another service and the church continued to grow. Much to this deacon's surprise.

Multiple services are a topic of consideration in many churches today. I'll never forget the time we came home from visiting another church and my daughter looked at me and said, "Can you believe they only have two morning services in that church!" At that time, we were attending a church that offered as many as seven weekend services, so the contrast was clear to her.

Why consider multiple services? Why should you go through the pain of change in your church's ministry one more time? Here

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are a few considerations.

*Multiple Services Reach More People*

Research shows that churches offering multiple services will probably add a minimum of 15% to their attendance and income within a year. Some of those being added to the church are hearing the gospel for the first time.

My father has been a pastor for over 40 years. In his late twenties he was pastoring a country church just outside Spokane, Washington, that had grown to the point of bulging.

He said, "Son, I'll never forget the Sunday when 140 people crowded into an auditorium designed to seat half that many. I talked with the deacons, asking them if we should consider introducing a building project to enlarge our current building, or maybe even relocate. They wouldn't hear of it."

When my father told me that story I asked him if he had considered the possibility of two services. He looked at me and shook his head and said, "No, no one had even heard of such a thing in those days."

To some degree, multiple services represent new technology in the church. Although you can't buy software to make it happen, it is more effective than any computer program on the market. Just as each new computer program takes time to understand, so does the concept of multiple services; but the added productivity makes it a wise choice and worthy of the extra effort.

*Multiple Services Provide More Choices*

Who would enjoy going to a restaurant, opening the menu and finding only one item available? Some patrons might even be insulted at the restaurant's limited menu. We like choices. In the church, though, we often expect people to come when we offer only one service. That philosophy offers few choices to a lost and dying world, and fails to ask, "What do people need?"

*Multiple Services Add to Your Church's Infrastructure*

A third consideration has to do with enlarging the network of workers in the church. When the church offers multiple services

those coming to the first service are free to minister in children's ministry, ushering, parking or other duties during other services, if they choose to do so. It adds a strengthening factor to the church's infrastructure to develop such possibilities. Ministries needed to support an additional service open the opportunity for more people to serve and make a meaningful contribution. This can bring a lot of personal fulfillment. Everyone needs to be needed.

### *Parking*

A church that I worked with discovered their parking lot was 93% full in the first service and 78% full in the second service. These were early symptoms of a plateau in this church's future. Additional services would be a cost-effective way to move forward.

Parking can be a crucial reason for considering multiple services. In the second church I pastored this problem surfaced. One Sunday an usher observed several cars driving through our parking lot looking for a space. When they found none, they simply drove away. I was frustrated to say the least, but I learned a good lesson.

The building code called for one parking space for every four people, but we knew that most of the time only one or two people came in those cars in our lot and along the street. Some families came in two or three cars. I came to the conclusion that we would soon plateau unless we planned alternatives. Multiple services would help relieve our parking pressure.

### *Multiple Services Can Increase Income*

We plateaued in attendance while I was in the process of introducing multiple services to our church's resistant policy makers. One additional reason, though, seemed to connect with them. I simply calculated our average weekly offering and divided the number of parking places into it, coming up with an average of \$44 per parking spot. Is it possible that an additional service would open the door for more people and eventually increase our income? Although no one would openly say that higher income was a major reason for offering multiple services, it didn't hurt the argument at all.

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*Multiple Services are an Alternative to Building*

With one decision you can double your square footage, parking and educational facilities. New construction may never be totally replaced by multiple services, but it can be a great stop-gap measure.

*Getting Started*

Certainly there can be resistance to multiple services and pastors should not think that everyone will agree with the idea immediately. I was a bit naive in thinking that others would be as excited about it as I was. That never was the case in any of the churches that I helped go to multiple services. In retrospect, I am honestly grateful for those who resisted the idea because they helped me to develop processes that would involve the whole congregation.

One of the best ideas is the "test run" concept. I have to give credit to Dr. Win Arn of Church Growth, Inc., for suggesting the idea of a three-month trial run. When I was talking with the policy makers of my second church, who were more reluctant to this idea than any of the others I pastored, I brought up the idea of simply having a 90-day test run. This concept helped me open a closed door.

It began with a statement like, "Let's try multiple services from September through December and then survey the congregation for their response. If it's not working, we'll re-evaluate." After eight long months of discussion with both the staff and the board, finally a workable plan came together to introduce the idea to the church.

Amazingly enough, within the first ninety days of multiple services, the church grew by about 150 people. I don't want to delude anyone into thinking that multiple services are easy. Our staff planned through the summer for ushers, worship teams, Sunday School teachers and child care workers. I believe, though, that it is easier to go from two services to three services or even more, than from one service to two. I am a firm believer now that almost every church can have at least two morning services. The return is worth the investment.

At the end of our three-month period we surveyed the congregation. I printed a sampling of the results in the weekly program

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(bulletin). Eighty-five per cent were positive and fifteen per cent were negative. In order to be fair, I presented both positive and negative comments in proportion. At this point the congregation made the decision that we would stay on the course of multiple services. We had crossed into new territory.

Another tool that I used to take a congregation to multiple services was the faith promise approach. In many churches the term "faith promise" only applies to missions giving. We took that concept and adapted it to multiple services. We included a "9:00 a.m. Service Faith Promise Pledge Card" inside the Sunday program. We didn't ask for money, but we did ask people to give their time by coming to a new service. This would allow someone they didn't know, who was lost and without Christ, to have room to come and hear the Word of God at another service. Usually the faith promise pledge is only for about six months. No one likes an "open-ended" commitment, and six months is long enough to get things going in a new format.

Wonderfully, about 40% of those in attendance signed up for the first service. This is extremely important because every service needs to have critical mass in order to make it successful. I have found that churches need to fill about 25% of their seating capacity in order to make the service "feel" acceptable. This is a good measuring stick to identify critical mass.

What about resisters? Those who study innovative ideas tell us that two to five percent of any group will resist, and an additional fifteen percent could be reluctant to accept any new idea. One of the ways we handled that was to anticipate possible questions that could be asked by any group in the church. We put together a handout where we listed the anticipated questions and the response to each one of them. This question and answer sheet was handed out at the beginning of the process of testing two services. It answered a lot of questions and helped develop an attitude of acceptance in the congregation.

One of the comments made by most people who resist multiple services is the issue of "splitting" the church. Clearly we can't split a church by simply going to multiple services any more than you could split a church by having multiple Sunday School

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classes. The point usually being made is that they won't be able to make the personal connections to which they're accustomed.

The best piece of information I ever heard on this subject was the concept that we maintain a close relationship with about 60 people in our life at any given time. That research came from noted Church Growth author Elmer Towns. He states that research shows that churches from 100 to 5,000 in attendance came to the same conclusion. On the average someone can only relate to about 60 people in their life. In other words, you can't know everyone anyway. Actually, what the resistors may be saying is, "I need fellowship time and I'm afraid that I won't have it at my church with this change."

When churches offer multiple services they may want to schedule coffee or fellowship time as part of the service. If you can't do that in the time provided in the worship schedule you'll need to consider alternatives that will provide people with enough opportunity for them to fellowship and develop relationships. It's a basic human need and the bottom line is if we don't provide it in the church they'll find it some place else.

One of the churches that I have enjoyed watching is in Bellingham, Washington. Christ The King Community Church, pastored by Dr. Steve Mason, is one of the fastest growing churches in America. Their first building only seated about 200 people, yet the church was able to grow from 70 to over 1000 in six years in the same building.

How did they accomplish this? Through as many as seven weekend services. They now consistently have over 2200 in their services every week end and have moved into a larger rented building. Christ the King Community Church not only has multiple services, they use multiple campuses to fulfill their vision. The main campus has three services and an auxiliary campus has two services. This is all accomplished in about five hours on a Sunday morning.

One of the keys that helped make this happen was the "teaching team" concept. This concept has the senior pastor as a leader of a team of teachers. In this church there are three basic teaching pastors who teach on rotation. The rotation takes place about

every three or four weeks. The senior pastor will do a five or six week series and then the other pastors will teach for a week or two, rotating through the services.

There are also churches that have started additional worship services with an ethnic flavor, such as a Russian or Hispanic service. Others stay with a generation flavor, such as a "boomer" service, referring to those aging in their 30's to 50's, or a "buster" service, referring to those in their 20's.

Whatever the case is, more services and more ministries mean more opportunities. It's a lot like fishing. The more lines you have in the water, the more fish you're going to catch. Although multiple services may not be in every church's future, I honestly believe that they will be a regular occurrence in more churches in the coming years. Land and building costs, personal schedules and ministry opportunities all point to the fact that this is the case.

Irregular work schedules, sky rocketing building costs and the desire to be given more choices force the innovative pastor who wants to lead a growing congregation to consider this as one of the most viable options the Holy Spirit has ever put on their pastoral plate. It may not be easy. It may take a concerted effort on the part of the leadership, but in a hundred years those who were in darkness and who come to the light as a result of your efforts will thank you because you lived in obedience to Christ's commission to go into all the world and make disciples. And that's what this is about.

Could multiple services be in your church's future? I hope so.

Writer

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